

Religious Identity Politics in Post-Reform Indonesia from a Global South Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Religious identity politics has become a key dynamic in Indonesia's post-Reform democracy. This study analyses this phenomenon through the lens of the Global South, integrating the concepts of democratisation, populism, digital media, religion-state relations, and postcolonial legacies. The research employs a qualitative approach, utilising an interpretative-critical case study design through discourse analysis. The findings indicate that democratisation has not diminished the role of religion in politics. Rather, it has created a structure of opportunities that allows religious identity to be transformed into a source of political legitimacy, mobilisation, and contestation. The fragmentation of religious authority, the rise of digital religious populism, and the ongoing negotiation between nationalism and transnational religious currents within a postcolonial state reinforce this process. These findings suggest that the politics of religious identity cannot be understood as an episodic electoral phenomenon but rather as a political ecosystem shaped by the interaction among democratic institutions, colonial history, religious actors, digital technology, and global networks. This study expands the analysis of identity politics in the Global South's democracies by offering a more relational and multidimensional interpretation, whilst emphasising that the quality of democracy is determined not by the presence or absence of religion in the public sphere, but by the ability of democratic institutions to manage identity competition inclusively and constitutionally.

A. Introduction

Religious identity politics has become one of the most significant arenas in the shaping of Indonesia's post-Reform democracy (Qodir, 2025). The political changes since 1998 have not only brought an end to the centralisation of power under the New Order, but have also opened up space for freedom of expression, electoral competition, decentralisation, the pluralisation of political actors, and the expansion of public participation (Al Azkiya et al., 2025). This openness has simultaneously created a new arena for religious identity to emerge as a source of legitimacy, solidarity, representation and political mobilisation. In this context, religion no longer operates solely as a realm of private belief. Still, it has become a source of political language used to define collective interests, establish moral authority, form political affiliations and negotiate group positions within the public sphere. Consequently, the politics of religious identity cannot be adequately understood merely as a deviation from democracy, as its emergence is in fact intertwined with political liberalisation, institutional transformation, and the competition for power that has developed since the Reformasi.

The relationship between religion and politics in Indonesian democracy is ambivalent. Religion can serve as the basis for public ethics, social solidarity, criticism of injustice, and demands for recognition of marginalised groups. At the same time, it can be constructed as a symbolic boundary between 'us' and 'them' when religious identity is used to question the legitimacy, piety, nationalism, or political viability of other groups. This ambivalence has become increasingly apparent in a series of electoral contests, from the 2014 General Election, the 2017 Jakarta Regional Election, the 2019 General Election, right through to the 2024 General Election (Pepinsky, 2025). The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election demonstrated the capacity of religious sentiment to shape mass mobilisation and political preferences, whilst the 2019 general election expanded this configuration into a polarisation that brought together religious identity, populism and political antagonism (Pratiknyo, 2026).

The 2024 General Election reveals a different yet still significant development, in that the articulation of religious identity is not always manifested through open mobilisation or the dominance of Islamist parties, but is increasingly distributed through candidates' strategies, organisational networks, symbolic representation, moral issues and digital political communication (Aryanta, 2025; Chaplin, 2025). These changes indicate that the politics of religious identity is not a static phenomenon but is constantly being reconfigured in response to changes in institutions, communication technologies, and political competition strategies. This complexity demands an analysis that goes beyond a purely electoral approach. The Global South perspective provides a relevant analytical framework because it does not merely position Indonesia as a case of non-Western democracy, but as a postcolonial society with a history of state-building, religious configurations, social inequalities and citizenship relations that differ from the experience of European liberal secularisation.

The Global South is not merely a geographical category, but an epistemological position that highlights how colonialism, modern state-building, unequal development, democratisation, and hierarchies of knowledge continue to shape contemporary political life. The relationship between religion and politics in Indonesia cannot, therefore, be assumed to follow the logic of the separation of religion and state that has developed within the Western democratic experience (Intan, 2023). Religion, on the contrary, fulfils a broader social function as a source of legitimacy, a network of communities, a moral authority, a means of articulating injustice, and a basis for social mobilisation (Ulum et al., 2025). At the same time, the colonial legacy and state administrative practices continue to influence how religion is categorised, recognised, regulated and negotiated in public life (Tias et al., 2026). The politics of religious identity must therefore be understood as the product of the interplay between democratic postcolonial history, state regulation, social inequality and the transformation of the public sphere.

Earlier works have made significant contributions to explaining this phenomenon but have developed along relatively fragmented analytical lines. Some studies frame the politics of religious identity as a problem for democracy due to its links to polarisation, the exclusion of minority groups, and the delegitimisation of political opponents (Arifin et al., 2025; Faridah, 2026; Suryana & Bajari, 2026). Other studies focus on Islamic populism and demonstrate how the category of the *'ummah'* is politically constructed to pit the public against elites perceived as secular, corrupt, or failing to represent the interests of the majority (de Groot Heupner & Rane, 2023; Hidayah et al., 2025; Rakhmani, 2024). Meanwhile, developments in the study of digital politics reveal that social media has transformed the way religious identity is produced and disseminated through disinformation, propaganda, online influencers, emotional content, and the creation of 'us versus them' dichotomies (Dikjiratmi, 2025; Lim, 2025).

Several other studies highlight a trend in research on Indonesian Islamic populism that oscillates between analyses of identity and political agency on the one hand, and studies of digital platforms, hoaxes, and the formation of electoral identities on the other (Akmaliah & Nadzir, 2024; As' adi, 2026; Bah & Arif, 2024). These findings enrich our understanding of contemporary Islamic politics, whilst simultaneously demonstrating that religion operates across multiple political arenas and cannot be reduced to electoral preferences or ideological expressions alone. This conceptual complexity is also evident in the distinction between identity politics and the politicisation of identity.

Identity politics can operate as a struggle for recognition when a particular group uses its identity to demand rights, equality or representation, whilst the politicisation of identity refers to the instrumental use of identity to gain power, reinforce domination or exclude other groups (Arifin et al., 2025). This distinction is important because the use of the term 'identity politics' in Indonesian discourse is often normative and pejorative, as if any articulation of religious identity were automatically at odds with democracy. In fact, the more fundamental analytical issue lies not in the existence of identity itself, but in the process of how that identity is constructed, by whom it is mobilised, within what power structures it gains political power, and what consequences it has for civic relations.

Developments in the run-up to the 2024 general election further underscore the need for a more integrative analysis. Several studies indicate that the mobilisation of Muslim voter support is not only carried out by Islamic parties, but also by nationalist parties that adopt religious issues, networks and symbols within the electoral contest (Aspinall et al., 2011; Bouchier, 2019; Hamayotsu, 2011). This situation demonstrates that religious identity politics can no longer be mapped solely based on the dichotomy between Islamic and secular parties. It transcends institutional boundaries through elite coalitions, civil society organisations, candidates' communications, issues of welfare, education and morality, and even symbolic representation in the digital sphere. This shift also indicates that the electoral failure of Islamic parties does not in itself signify a decline in the influence of religion in politics. On the contrary, religious politics may diffuse into various platforms and strategies that are not always institutionally labelled as Islamic, yet continue to utilise symbolic resources and religious networks as part of the competition for power (Solahudin & Fakhruroji, 2019).

The main research gap in this study is the lack of integration of analyses of post-Reform religious identity politics in Indonesia into a single framework that simultaneously links electoral dynamics, religious populism, digital transformation, religion-state relations, and postcolonial legacies from a Global South perspective. Previous studies have generally succeeded in explaining one of these dimensions, but have tended to treat electoral politics, Islamic populism, digital media and the governance of religion as separate spheres of analysis (Bah & Arif, 2024; Rakhmani & Hadiz, 2021). Consequently, there remains a limited understanding of how religious identity gains political power through interactions among democratic structures, postcolonial memory and institutions, social inequality, religious authority, political networks, and changes in communication technology. This fragmentation

also limits the literature's ability to explain why the politics of religious identity can shift in form from open mass mobilisation to symbolic, institutional and digital strategies without losing its relevance in political competition.

Building on this gap, this study positions the politics of religious identity as a practice of power shaped by the intersection of religion, democracy, coloniality, populism, institutions and communication technologies, rather than merely as a temporary electoral strategy or the ideological expression of a particular group. This framework allows religious identity to be interpreted more proportionately as a source of recognition, solidarity and moral articulation, whilst also serving as an instrument of exclusion when used to define who is considered legitimate within the political community.

This study aims to analyse how the politics of religious identity is constructed, mobilised, negotiated and transformed in post-Reformasi Indonesia, and to explain the historical and contemporary structures that enable such identities to gain political power in electoral, institutional and digital arenas. The significance of this study lies in the development of an interpretation that links Indonesia's democratic experience to the broader debate on religion, populism, citizenship postcolonial democracy in the Global South, thereby positioning Indonesia not merely as an object to which theories derived from the political experiences of the Global North are applied, but as a source of empirical and conceptual experience for broadening our understanding of democratic transformation postcolonial societies.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using an interpretative-critical case study design to explain how the politics of religious identity are produced, negotiated and mobilised in post-Reformasi Indonesian democracy through the perspective of the Global South as an epistemological framework that situates this phenomenon within the historical relationship between religion, the state, postcolonial legacies and contestations over citizenship. Religious identity politics is operationalised through the articulation of symbols, narratives, authority, and religious affiliations to establish legitimacy, mobilise politically, and delineate the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in the power struggle. The units of analysis include elite discourse, religious organisations, legal and policy documents, the media, digital political communication, and academic literature, selected through purposive theoretical sampling based on relevance and analytical significance, spanning the Reform era to the most recent electoral period.

The main instruments of this study are further supported by document review protocols, thematic analyses, and analytical matrices that integrate identity politics, religious populism, postcolonial democracy, and the Global South. The credibility of the findings is ensured through the triangulation of sources and theories, iterative reading, negative-case analysis, audit trails, and researcher reflexivity. Data were collected through corpus construction, narrative classification, mapping of actors and power relations, and the reconstruction of the socio-historical context (Rheindorf & Vollmer, 2026). They were subsequently analysed using critical discourse analysis and historical-contextual interpretation to uncover the mechanisms of production and transformation, as well as the political consequences of religious identity for democracy, pluralism, majority-minority relations, and inclusive citizenship in Indonesia.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Democratisation as the Engine of the Production of Religious Identity Politics

Post-Reformasi democratisation has not only transformed Indonesia's political institutional architecture, but has also reconfigured the social and institutional conditions that have enabled religious identity to gain new political power (Sandi et al., 2026). Political

liberalisation, electoral competition, decentralisation, freedom of association, media pluralisation and the expansion of the public sphere have created a structure of political opportunity that allows religion to shift from being a source of social identification to a source of legitimacy, representation and the mobilisation of power (F. A. Latif et al., 2025). In this sense, democratisation does not mechanically lead to religious identity politics, but rather shapes a competitive arena that enhances the strategic value of identity when political actors require a basis for solidarity that is easily recognisable, has moral resonance, and can link political interests to collective affiliations.

Religious identity politics should therefore not be interpreted as a pre-modern residue at odds with democracy, but rather as one of the possibilities actually produced by the expansion of participation and competition within democracy itself. Indonesia's experience clearly illustrates this paradox. The New Order regime did not eliminate religion from politics, but regulated and restricted its articulation through the centralisation of power, the depoliticisation of social organisations, and control over the political representation of Islam (Adiprasetyo, 2026).

Reformasi transformed this configuration by expanding the space for religious organisations, political parties, civil society groups, local elites, and non-state actors to compete in defining the public interest. Consequently, religion has transformed an identity largely managed by the state into a political resource that various actors can utilise to gain legitimacy. From the perspective of the political opportunity structure, political freedom broadens access to the arena of mobilisation (Prianto et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in the Bourdieusian sense, religious authority and symbols can function as symbolic capital, converted into political capital when moral legitimacy holds value in electoral competition. This conversion explains why the politicisation of religion is not limited to Islam-based parties, but is also undertaken by nationalist parties, candidates, the political bureaucracy, civil society organisations, and informal networks seeking to forge symbolic ties with voter groups.

These dynamics have become increasingly apparent since the 2014 general election, the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, and the 2019 general election, when religious identity became intertwined with populism and political polarisation. However, developments leading up to the 2024 general election suggest that the influence of religion need not be realised through overt and confrontational identity mobilisation. Religious identity is increasingly diffused into candidates' public image, elite coalitions, networks of religious organisations, moral issues, welfare policies, and digital political communication. This shift is significant because it demonstrates that the weakening of Islamic parties or the decline in the intensity of identity-based rhetoric is not synonymous with a reduction in religious politics. On the contrary, it may indicate a shift in mode from explicit mobilisation towards symbolic and institutional normalisation. Identity politics must therefore be understood as a dynamic process capable of adapting to changes in electoral incentives and power configurations.

The Global South perspective provides a more adequate explanation of these configurations, as the relationship between democratisation and religion does not unfold within a historically neutral space. Many postcolonial societies carry a legacy of identity categorisation, religious administration, social hierarchies, and state institutions shaped by colonialism. In such a context, the classical secularisation assumption that modernisation and democratisation will linearly reduce religion's role in politics becomes problematic.

A comparison with India illustrates how electoral democracy can be intertwined with Hindu nationalism. Türkiye demonstrates the transformation of religious authority through democratic and state institutions. Nigeria illustrates how religion interacts with regional fragmentation and the distribution of power. Meanwhile, Evangelical political mobilisation in Brazil demonstrates the capacity of religious networks to transform moral authority into electoral influence. Although the configurations of each country differ, these comparative

patterns show that in many Global South democracies, religion is not an external element of democracy but rather a social resource that can be articulated through democratic institutions.

Indonesia presents additional complexities because the state has never fully separated religion from public administration. Institutional recognition of religion, the regulation of religious life, the bureaucratisation of identity, and state intervention in various aspects of religious life have produced a political landscape in which religion functions simultaneously as a moral, social and administrative category. Democratisation, therefore, does not operate in a society where religious identity lies outside the state, but rather in a configuration that has, from the outset, institutionalised religion as a key category in state-citizen relations. From a postcolonial perspective, this situation reveals a continuity between the legacy of identity governance and contemporary democracy. Categories previously used to regulate society can be rearticulated as sources of representation and political claims as democratic competition becomes increasingly open.

The dimension of populism deepens these mechanisms. Religious identity gains power when constructed not merely as an affiliation of belief, but as a moral boundary separating groups deemed to represent the people, the faithful, or the authentic interests of society from elites or other groups positioned as threats. This populist logic allows political differences to be translated into moral antagonism, thereby making democratic compromise more difficult. However, the relationship between religion and populism is not inherent.

Religious identity can serve as a vehicle for demands for equality and recognition. Still, it can also become an instrument of exclusion when political legitimacy is linked to claims regarding moral purity or membership of a particular religious group. Consequently, the key issue is not the existence of religious identity, but rather the mechanisms through which that identity is constructed as a principle of political division between groups deemed legitimate and those considered to lie outside the political community.

Digital transformation has subsequently altered the scale, speed and structure of the reproduction of these identities. Social media reduces the reliance of mobilisation on formal organisations and enables religious narratives to be produced through decentralised networks involving political elites, religious figures, influencers, ‘buzzers’, online communities and ordinary users (Karimullah et al., 2022). Algorithmic infrastructure tends to favour content with high emotional resonance, meaning that religious issues can quickly become linked to morality, nationalism, economic injustice, or threats to particular groups.

Digitalisation is thus not merely a new channel for pre-existing identity politics, but transforms the structure of its production and circulation. The boundary between producers and consumers of discourse is becoming increasingly fluid, whilst political identities are reproduced through everyday interactions that extend beyond the electoral calendar. The relationship between democratisation and identity politics is therefore evolving from institutional liberalisation towards a democratisation of communication that simultaneously broadens participation and increases the likelihood of fragmentation within the public sphere.

This integrative analysis highlights the limitations of approaches that treat the study of electoral politics, religious populism, digital media, religion-state relations, and postcolonial legacies as separate fields. These five dimensions, in fact, form a single, interrelated mechanism. Democratisation creates a structure of opportunities, postcolonial history, categories, and institutions through which identities are organised. Religion provides symbolic capital and social networks (Shukri et al., 2026). Populism transforms identities into political antagonisms, whilst digital technology amplifies the capacity to produce and reproduce these narratives. Religious identity politics thus arises not from a single variable but from a multi-layered interaction among institutions, history, actors, discourse, and technology.

This framework shifts the analytical question from whether religion strengthens or weakens democracy to how specific configurations of democracy enable religious identity to

acquire political value, who can convert it into power, and under what conditions such mobilisation transforms into inclusive representation or political exclusion. On this basis, democratisation is more accurately understood as a mechanism for the political production of religious identity in a conditional, rather than a deterministic, sense. This mechanism operates through a series of interconnections between the opening up of political space, competition for legitimacy, the conversion of religious symbolic capital, the formation of populist antagonisms, and amplification via digital infrastructure, whilst specific institutional legacies and power relations determine its final form.

2. The Fragmentation of Religious Authority and the Rise of Digital Religious Populism

From the perspective of the Global South, the fragmentation of religious authority is a consequence of the convergence of democratisation, the neoliberalisation of the media, and the transformation of postcolonial societies (Asthana, 2022). Institutions with historical legitimacy no longer monopolise religious authority. Still, it is instead produced through competition in the public sphere, which is increasingly influenced by the logic of visibility, popularity and affectivity. Similar phenomena can be observed in the rise of televangelism in Brazil, digital Islam in Türkiye, online da'wah in Malaysia, and nationalist Hindu networks in India, all of which demonstrate that religious legitimacy increasingly depends on actors' ability to build an audience, manage their image, and master digital communication infrastructure (Fitzgerald et al., 2026; M. A. Latif, 2024). Although the institutional configurations of each country differ, there is a common trend: religious authority is shifting from a hierarchical model to a networked model (networked religious authority), in which legitimacy is derived through the circulation of discourse and public acceptance rather than solely through institutional positions.

This shift has significant implications for the political configuration of religious identity in Indonesia. As authority becomes increasingly decentralised, religious interpretations are also subject to more intense competition. Various actors, ranging from the ulama, digital preachers, and religious influencers to politicians and online communities, participate in the production of narratives concerning morality, leadership, nationalism, and citizenship. Consequently, religious identity is no longer shaped predominantly through vertical transmission from institutions to the public, but through ongoing horizontal negotiation in the digital sphere. Under such conditions, religion becomes not only a source of normative values, but also a source of legitimacy contested by various political actors seeking to gain influence in the public sphere.

This fragmentation of authority provides fertile ground for the growth of digital religious populism. Unlike classical populism, which relies on charismatic leadership and the mobilisation of mass organisations, digital religious populism develops through fluid, decentralised communication networks that operate in real time. Religious identity is constructed through moral narratives that reduce political complexity to a dichotomy between groups perceived as representing religious values and those perceived as threatening religion, the nation, or public morality. Within this mechanism, political legitimacy is no longer primarily built through programmatic arguments, but through the ability to evoke collective affect, a sense of threat, emotional solidarity, and moral identification, all reinforced by the algorithmic logic of digital media.

Social media plays a far more substantive role than merely serving as a medium for disseminating information. Digital infrastructure functions as an algorithmic amplifier that prioritises content with high levels of emotional engagement, meaning that narratives containing religious symbols, moral claims or identity-based sentiments are more likely to be widely circulated (Nugroho et al., 2026). Consequently, the boundaries between religious, political, and social communication are becoming increasingly blurred. Religious identity is

produced through processes that occur simultaneously across online sermons, video clips, memes, hashtags, digital conversation spaces, and the influencer ecosystem. Consequently, the reproduction of identity no longer depends on electoral momentum but has become part of everyday communication practices.

Identity politics has thus transformed episodic mobilisation into a continuous discursive reproduction. In this context, digital religious populism not only expands the reach of identity politics but also alters the mechanisms of democratic legitimisation. Political legitimacy is increasingly built through claims of moral authenticity rather than governmental competence or public policy capacity (Bertelli & Falletti, 2025). Actors who successfully present themselves as defenders of religion or guardians of moral values gain symbolic capital that can be converted into political support, even though such claims are not always accompanied by a substantive agenda relating to public welfare.

This conversion of religious symbolic capital into political capital demonstrates that religion functions as a strategic resource in democratic competition, particularly when political institutions face a crisis of trust and society seeks alternative sources of legitimacy outside the state's formal mechanisms. Nevertheless, the fragmentation of religious authority does not merely result in polarisation or exclusion. A more open structure also allows for the emergence of a more pluralistic contestation of religious discourse, including the development of narratives of a moderate, inclusive and democratic Islam that utilise digital spaces to expand their sphere of influence (Karimullah et al., 2023). Therefore, digitalisation does not have a single normative consequence. Its impact is determined by the relationship between the design of digital platforms, the configuration of actors, the capacity of democratic institutions, and the dynamics of civil society in managing discursive competition. Religious identity politics must thus be understood as a constantly contested arena, rather than a predetermined outcome.

The fragmentation of religious authority and the rise of digital religious populism serve as mechanisms that link democratisation, the legacy of religious governance, and the transformation of communication technologies. Consequently, the politics of religious identity in Indonesia cannot be explained solely as a product of electoral competition or as a direct consequence of social media's development. These phenomena result from the interaction among the restructuring of religious authority, changes in the structure of public communication, the logic of populism, and the configuration of postcolonial democracy. This integrative analysis directly demonstrates that the electoral dimension, the relationship between religion and the state, populism, and digital media are not isolated processes, but rather form a single configuration that collectively produces, reproduces, and transforms the politics of religious identity within contemporary Indonesian democracy.

3. Identity Politics as an Arena for Negotiation between Nationalism and Religious Transnationalism

The development of religious identity politics in the era of contemporary democracy can no longer be understood solely as a domestic issue, as political identity formation occurs amid an increasingly intense interplay between national dynamics and transnational currents. The globalisation of communication, the migration of ideas, the development of digital technology, and the strengthening of transnational religious networks have expanded the sphere of circulation of religious ideas, symbols and authority beyond national borders (Mohiuddin, 2023). Consequently, the politics of religious identity has become not only an arena for electoral competition at the national level, but also a space for negotiation between nation-building projects and various forms of religious identity with a transnational orientation. In this context, religious identity is not inherently at odds with nationalism. Still, it is continually negotiated through processes of adaptation, resistance and hybridisation

influenced by a country's history, institutional structures and its position within the Global South.

The Global South perspective provides an important analytical framework for understanding these dynamics, as most post-colonial states did not construct nationalism through a uniform process of secularisation, as was the experience in Western Europe (Khosro, 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2024). Instead, nationalism in many developing countries emerged through the interaction between religion, anti-colonial struggles, and the formation of the modern state. Consequently, the relationship between nationalism and religion tends to be one of negotiation rather than dichotomy. The state seeks to maintain national cohesion through institutions of citizenship, whilst religious actors strive to ensure that religious values, identities and authority retain a place in public life. Identity politics thus becomes the arena in which these two projects both compete and adapt to one another.

The Indian experience illustrates how nationalism can be redefined through the religious identity of the majority (Savariyar, 2022). The Hindutva ideology does not merely position Hinduism as the dominant religion, but links it to definitions of the nation, national history and citizenship. In this configuration, the boundary between religious identity and national identity becomes increasingly blurred, so that loyalty to the nation is often measured through affiliation with the majority identity. In contrast, Türkiye exhibits a different dynamic. The tradition of Kemalist secularism, which for several decades restricted religious expression in the public sphere, has transformed the AKP government, which has integrated Islamic symbols and values into the project of Turkish nationalism without entirely abandoning modern state institutions (Akan, 2023). The case of Türkiye demonstrates that democratisation does not always lead to greater secularisation but can open space for the redefinition of national identity through religious symbols.

In Brazil, the relationship between nationalism and religion has evolved through the growing influence of Evangelical groups in the political process (Barbosa Jr & Casarões, 2022). The Church has not only become a religious institution but has also built social, economic, educational and media networks capable of influencing the national political agenda. Meanwhile, in Nigeria, religious identity interacts with ethnic and regional fragmentation, meaning that nationalism must be continually negotiated amidst competition between Muslim and Christian communities with different geographical and political bases (Aboi, 2024). This comparison demonstrates that the politics of religious identity in the Global South's democracies do not follow a single pattern. Nevertheless, there is a common trend whereby religious identity gains political power when it is successfully linked to narratives concerning national interests, security, public morality, or the nation's future.

Indonesia presents a more complex configuration than some of these cases, as nationalism was from the outset built upon the principle of constitutional pluralism, which recognises religious diversity without establishing an official state religion (Karimullah, 2022). Pancasila serves as the normative foundation that allows religious identities to remain vibrant in the public sphere without turning the state into a theocratic state (Nawawi et al., 2025). However, the openness of post-Reformasi democracy reveals that this relationship is dynamic. Various political actors seek to link religious identity with the narrative of nationalism through issues of morality, national unity, the protection of the faithful, state sovereignty, and even welfare policy. At the same time, various transnational ideas, whether conservative, moderate or progressive in nature, enter the country via educational networks, international organisations, the diaspora, digital media and global religious communities (Sainun et al., 2026). Consequently, identity politics in Indonesia is influenced not only by the country's internal dynamics but also by the circulation of ideas that transcend territorial boundaries.

Digital transformation is accelerating this process by reducing the state's ability to act as the sole steward of the public sphere. Digital platforms enable global religious narratives to interact directly with domestic political issues, thereby rendering the boundary between

national and transnational concerns increasingly fluid (Ahmed et al., 2025). Issues such as the Palestinian question, Islamophobia, the Middle East conflict, human rights, religious conservatism, and even global religious movements can be rapidly rearticulated as part of national political contestation (Yi, 2026). In this context, religious identity is no longer shaped solely by local social experiences but also by a collective imagination that develops within transnational digital spaces.

Identity politics thus moves beyond the logic of domestic representation and becomes part of a network of global solidarity that is constantly negotiated against national interests. Nevertheless, the relationship between nationalism and religious transnationalism is not always antagonistic. In many cases, political actors actually engage in a process of vernacularisation of transnational ideas to make them fit the national context (Jakimow et al., 2023; Rawson, 2026). Values derived from global religious networks are reinterpreted in terms of the constitution, national development, democracy or Pancasila, thereby gaining legitimacy at the domestic level. Conversely, the state also incorporates some of the demands of religious communities into public policy without altering the state's fundamental character. This process of mutual adaptation demonstrates that religious identity politics is better understood as an arena of negotiation rather than unilateral domination. National identity and religious identity do not exist in a zero-sum relationship, but rather mutually shape one another through an ongoing process of compromise, adaptation and contestation.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings expand our understanding of identity politics in the democracies of the Global South. Previous literature has tended to explain identity politics through the separate lenses of electoral politics, populism, digital media or church-state relations (Cremer, 2022; Margvelashvili, 2025). In reality, religious identity is also shaped by the interaction between domestic nationalism and transnational networks, resulting in distinct political configurations in each country. Identity politics is thus a product of the intersection between democratic structures, colonial legacies, state institutions, the circulation of global ideas, and the transformation of digital communication (Wassie et al., 2024). Within this framework, Indonesia is not merely an example of a Muslim-majority country experiencing the politicisation of religion (Sumaktoyo & Soedirgo, 2026). Still, it serves as a crucial laboratory for understanding how post-colonial democracy manages the tensions between national pluralism, religious authority, and increasingly intense transnational currents. This interpretation directly addresses a research gap by demonstrating that religious identity politics cannot be understood through a separation between domestic and global factors, but rather as the result of multilevel interactions linking democratisation, nationalism, religious transnationalism, and the dynamics of the Global South within a single, coherent analytical framework.

The integration of these dimensions demonstrates that post-Reformasi religious identity politics in Indonesia is better understood as a political ecosystem rather than merely an electoral phenomenon or the ideological expression of a particular group. An approach that merely frames identity politics as a product of electoral competition tends to overlook how identity is produced through the simultaneous interaction between democratic institutions, national history, social structures, religious networks, communication technologies, and global dynamics. Conversely, an analysis that emphasises only populism, digital media, or state-religion relations also fails to explain why the intensity of identity politics varies across contexts despite relatively similar developments in technology and democratic institutions (Ghaffari et al., 2025). This suggests that religious identity politics operates through mechanisms that are relational, multidimensional, and mutually reinforcing.

Within this framework, democratisation functions as a structure of opportunity that opens up space for competition and the expansion of political participation. The post-colonial legacy provides social categories, institutions, and systems of religious governance that form the foundation for the articulation of identity. The fragmentation of religious authority creates

new competition in the production of moral legitimacy. populism transforms identity into a language of antagonism that is effective in building political solidarity. Digital media accelerates the production, circulation and reproduction of identity narratives. Transnational networks introduce flows of ideas, symbols and authority that continually interact with domestic nationalist projects (Kastoryano, 2026). None of these dimensions possesses sufficient explanatory power when separated from the others. The politics of religious identity, in fact, emerges from the interconnection between these elements, which collectively shape the configuration of power in contemporary democracy.

This analysis demonstrates that religious identity is not an independent variable that automatically produces social polarisation or integration. The political power of identity is largely determined by the institutional configuration surrounding it, the distribution of symbolic resources, the nature of political competition, the state's capacity to manage diversity, and the structure of public communication prevailing during a given period. Thus, religious identity does not possess inherent political consequences. In certain contexts, identity can serve as a basis for recognition, social solidarity and democratic participation. In other contexts, the same identity can be constructed as an instrument of exclusion, delegitimation, or even majoritarianism. These variations underscore that it is not the identity itself that is decisive, but rather the political processes that construct its meaning, function, and use.

Indonesia is no exception within the Global South, but it possesses a distinctive configuration. Unlike India, which tends towards majoritarian religious nationalism. Türkiye, which demonstrates a reconfiguration of the relationship between secularism and political Islam (Sarihan, 2026). Brazil, which shows the institutionalisation of Evangelical influence in public policy or Nigeria, which faces simultaneous religious and ethnic fragmentation (de Sá Guimarães et al., 2023; Omoigberale, 2025). Indonesia has developed through a state model that recognises religious pluralism within the framework of Pancasila and the constitution (Nolte, 2023). This distinctiveness results in a more fluid pattern of identity politics, as no single actor, organisation or ideology dominates it. Identity politics operates through shifting coalitions, civil society networks, religious organisations, political elites, digital spaces and state institutions that interact with one another.

This synthesis simultaneously broadens the discourse on democracy in the Global South. Until now, academic debates have tended to pit liberal democracy against identity politics, as if the two were mutually exclusive. The findings of this discussion show that the relationship is far more complex. Democracy not only provides mechanisms for representation but also creates incentives for various actors to translate social identities into political language. At the same time, religious identity is not merely a threat to democracy. Rather, it can serve as a source of participation, the articulation of interests, and the strengthening of civil society, provided it is not constructed as a basis for the exclusion of citizens.

Religious identity politics in post-Reformasi Indonesia is understood as the result of a dynamic interplay between democratisation, post-colonial legacies, the transformation of religious authority, populism, digitalisation, and the circulation of transnational ideas. This perspective shifts the focus from sectoral explanations towards a more integrative understanding of how religious identity is produced, negotiated and transformed simultaneously across various political arenas. Consequently, this study not only provides a more comprehensive explanation of the political dynamics of religious identity in Indonesia but also offers an analytical framework for interpreting similar phenomena in other democracies in the Global South grappling with the intersection of religion, the state, democracy, and globalisation.

D. Conclusion

Religious identity politics in post-Reformasi Indonesia is not the sole product of electoral competition, populism, digitalisation or religion-state relations, but rather a political

configuration shaped by the interplay between democratisation, the legacy of postcolonial governance, the fragmentation of religious authority, digital religious populism, and the ongoing negotiation between nationalism and religious transnationalism. This finding addresses the fragmentation of the previous literature by demonstrating that these dimensions operate as a single relational ecosystem that transforms religious identity into a symbolic resource that can be converted into political legitimacy, mobilisation, recognition, or exclusion. Consequently, its implications for democracy are contingent upon the configuration of the institutions, power relations, and communication infrastructure that underpin it.

This Global South perspective thus shifts the assumption that religion is a residual phenomenon destined to recede with democratisation towards an understanding that postcolonial democracy can, in fact, simultaneously expand representation whilst providing incentives for the reproduction of identity boundaries. Theoretically, this synthesis promotes a relational, multi-level approach that links history, institutions, actors, discourse, technology and transnational circulation in the analysis of identity politics. In practical and policy terms, the findings call for strengthening democratic institutions, equal citizenship, digital literacy, accountable platform governance, and spaces for interfaith dialogue to prevent the transformation of representation into majoritarianism without restricting freedom of religion. The study's limitations lie in its interpretative nature and its focus on the Indonesian case, which restricts causal generalisations. Consequently, future research should test this framework longitudinally and comparatively across various democracies in the Global South through a combination of institutional analysis, digital data, surveys, and tracing transnational networks to elucidate the conditions that determine when religious identity deepens democratic representation and when it becomes a mechanism of civic exclusion.

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